

The Pennsylvania Department of Education
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EXISTING AND DEVELOPING RESOURCES TO MEET THE ACADEMIC NEEDS OF PENNSYLVANIA'S ADVANCED AND GIFTED STUDENTS

Introduction and Summary

- The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) provides resources for advanced and gifted students.
- PDE will implement a new plan to increase school district awareness of and access to these resources through improved communications, professional development and revitalization of the gifted network throughout the Commonwealth.
- PA Chapter 16. Special Education for Gifted Students requires school districts to identify gifted students and to provide services and programs based on the unique needs of identified students. PDE has delegated the operational responsibility for identification and programming to its school districts.
- Thousands of Pennsylvania's students receive college credit each year through AP exams or dual enrollment in high school and college and approximately 75,000 of Pennsylvania's students are identified as gifted.
- Although Chapter 16 specifies that gifted education "must be provided for gifted students which enables them to participate in acceleration or enrichment programs, or both... and to receive services according to their intellectual and academic abilities and needs" data from a survey (Maguire, 2008) of Pennsylvania school districts indicates that:
 - 70% do not have formal acceleration policies and more than 50% report never having accelerated any students.
 - 68% do not provide professional development on differentiation for advanced or gifted students in the regular education classroom.
 - 93% do not pre-assess students before beginning learning units to determine student mastery levels.
 - 87% do not provide pre-AP programs or have AP vertical teams.

While resources for advanced and gifted students have long been available at the state level and new resources are under development, the Pennsylvania Department of Education is committed to ensuring that Pennsylvania educators have a full and explicit understanding of the availability and applicability of these resources for their advanced and gifted students.

Foundational to the department's renewed emphasis on meeting the educational needs of advanced and gifted students are concerns about equity and access for all students. In keeping with these concerns, efforts made by the department will be designed to:

- afford all students the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of grade level work;
- be excused from this work if it has been mastered;
- be engaged in more advanced lessons whether or not their school districts provide pull-out enrichment classes, and whether or not the students have been formally identified as gifted.

Existing and Developing Resources for Advanced and Gifted Students

Existing: The State of Pennsylvania provides curricular, programmatic, informational, regulatory and legislative resources for advanced and gifted students that are available on the PDE website. Chapter 16 regulations and guidelines, gifted education forms, annotated and model versions of gifted education forms, basic education circulars and parent guidelines are among the resources that appear under the category “gifted education.”

Lesser known resources, such as the Pennsylvania Value-Added Assessment System (PVAAS) and Office of Dispute Resolution decisions, are sources of essential information to guide school district programming. PVAAS can be used to examine data directly related to the annual growth of cohorts of gifted students, as well as students’ probability of reaching advanced levels of performance on the PSSA. PVAAS is used by many districts for this purpose. Hearing Officer Decisions are available online on the PaTTAN website from the Office of Dispute Resolution, and provide specific analysis and results of due process decisions regarding gifted education that can inform educators and parents about every aspect of compliance with Chapter 16.

Chapter 4, also available online, outlines the State’s policies on early entrance to kindergarten and first grade, acceleration and early graduation, and researched-based options for advanced students. Dual enrollment in high school and college is supported through the Department’s \$8M Dual Enrollment Grants Project.

Links are provided on the PDE website to a free PDE Act 48 online course¹ for educators of gifted students and to organizations for and about gifted students, including The Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education (PAGE) and numerous others.

Developing:

Standards Aligned System (SAS)

The Standards Aligned System under development at PDE is being designed to provide diagnostic information concerning the placement of all students on learning progressions by content area and to make available curricular resources to meet the needs of all students based on their demonstrated mastery levels. “The alignment of appropriate pedagogy to gifted students relies on teacher decision making affected by environmental context and philosophy, and is not dependent on a simple identification of a set of pedagogical practices labeled ‘for the gifted’” (Kaplan, 2003). Research supports the use of above-grade level curriculum units for gifted learners in heterogeneous classrooms (Van Tassel-Baska, 2005) and of flexibly grouping students so that instruction can be tailored to their readiness levels (Tieso, 2005). Both strategies have been shown to improve achievement for gifted students and both are hallmarks of the new SAS system.

Although many Pennsylvania school districts provide pull-out enrichment programs for their gifted students, most of Pennsylvania’s gifted students spend from 75-100% of their school days in heterogeneous classrooms. PDE recognizes that “curriculum adaptations must be distinct enough to address a wide range of readiness levels, interests, and learning modes” (Tomlinson, Brighton, Hertberg,

Callahan, Moon, Brimjoin, Conover & Reynolds, 2003, p. 129). Suitable adaptations for advanced and gifted students include using advanced text materials, providing advanced novels on class themes, providing expert-level goals for student products, encouraging and supporting independent study, pre-testing students and exempting them from practicing skills they have already mastered, encouraging student choice, varying working groups including ample opportunities for work with other advanced students and providing opportunities to work alone (DeLisle, 2002; Mulhern, 2003; Parke, 1992; Tomlinson 1994; Van-Tassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005).

The SAS system is aligned with Pennsylvania standards, and will include diagnostic assessments so that teachers can easily determine which students should be flexibly grouped to do above-grade level work. Once mastery levels have been determined, teachers can access the wide variety of curricular resources that are available through SAS.

Acceleration

The premise of acceleration is that the educational placement must match the mastery level of the student rather than his or her age. Longitudinal research shows that when appropriately accelerated, gifted students exhibit improved motivation, and that “their grades are higher than those of their peers who chose not to accelerate, and they compare favorably with those of older students in their classes” (Lynch, p. 2, 1994). Single-subject or whole-grade acceleration, and curriculum compacting are models for gifted education which enjoy overwhelmingly positive, longitudinal research support, (Brody, et. al. 1987; Colangelo et. al., 2003; Gross, 1993; Lynch, 1994; Olszewski-Kubilius, 1989; Passow, 1994; Rogers, 2002; Robinson, 1996), but these practices are comparatively rare, and often meet with skepticism from educators. PDE Chapter 4 regulations allow for all forms of curricular acceleration including early entrance to kindergarten and first grade, single subject acceleration, curriculum compacting, whole grade acceleration, dual enrollment and early entrance to college. PDE recognizes that too few Pennsylvania school districts’ policies and practices encourage acceleration of advanced students, a situation that persists, in part, because of a lack of clear communication, professional development and explicit advice available to our educators.

Statewide Network of Resources for Advanced and Gifted Students

PDE formerly maintained a gifted liaison network throughout the Commonwealth that facilitated through the Pennsylvania Intermediate Unit system. This network supported school districts and parents in the 29 Intermediate Unit districts with information, professional development, collaboration and resource sharing. When the department position of Director of Gifted Education was vacated, the liaison system languished. In 2009, Intermediate Unit personnel re-established this network informally and have met quarterly to work together to reinstate the functions of the former gifted liaison network. As of February 2010, PDE has formalized the relationship between the newly formed Intermediate Unit gifted network and is in the process of building a revitalized system of communication, collaboration and professional development.

Professional Development

Many of Pennsylvania's teachers have received professional development in differentiated instruction, but little of that training has focused on differentiation for advanced students (Maguire, 2008). As a result, some teachers misunderstand differentiation for more able students as the assignment of *additional* work instead of more challenging replacement work. Even teachers who have received general training on differentiation may be unable to integrate effective, appropriately tiered lessons for the gifted unless they also have specific background knowledge about the nature and needs of gifted students and access to sufficiently rigorous materials and lessons. The PDE SAS system will provide teachers with immediate access to rigorous lessons for their advanced students and the Department's more than 50 SAS professional development sessions planned across the state will incorporate explicit training in the use of the system to meet the needs of advanced students.

As mentioned above, PDE offers an online gifted education professional development course¹ for Act 48 credit and also offers gifted education workshops for teachers, administrators and school psychologists at PaTTAN's annual spring conference in Hershey, PA. Additionally, through the work of Dr. Shirley Curl at the Bureau of Special Education, Division of Monitoring and Improvement, professional development sessions are offered periodically throughout the Commonwealth. PDE is committed to increasing communication about these existing professional development opportunities and to expanding the number of professional development opportunities through an increased presence at the annual PaTTAN conference as well as through the deployment of the Intermediate Unit gifted network. Also under consideration is the expansion and support of currently offered regional gifted conferences (such as the Delaware County Intermediate Unit annual conference). Additionally, a new emphasis is being placed on the creation and offering of gifted education Act 48 courses for teachers and Act 45/PIL courses for administrators. Three new gifted education Act 48 courses² have been approved in the last few months and have been accessed by many Pennsylvania educators and two Act 45 course proposals³ for administrators are currently being considered in PDE's Invitation to Qualify process.

Moreover, PDE has recently established a working relationship with the College Board to expand student access to Advanced Placement and pre-AP coursework and to extend the reach of professional development related to middle and high school rigor.

Communication

An integral aspect of expanding access to Pennsylvania's existing and developing resources for advanced and gifted students will be the creation and maintenance of new avenues of communication. A major step in this communication effort will be to bring together under one umbrella information and links concerning gifted education on the PDE SAS portal for easy reference. Clear advice will also be provided as to the relevance of these resources for supporting advanced and gifted students. This work will be undertaken in consultation with gifted education experts across the state.

Quarterly meetings of the Intermediate Unit Gifted Network will be continued and will include PDE representation. In addition, bi-annual meetings will be scheduled between PAGE and department representatives.

2010 Vision Statement

PDE is committed to providing all students in Pennsylvania the opportunity to reach their academic potential without limitation by grade level. In particular, the needs of advanced students in PA, including those identified as mentally gifted, and the research-based academic resources available for meeting them, must, be explicitly communicated throughout the Commonwealth. Although the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) provides numerous resources for advanced and gifted students, many are either unknown or underutilized by school districts. PDE will implement a new plan to increase school district awareness of and access to these resources through improved communications, professional development and revitalization of the gifted network throughout the Commonwealth, while developing new resources for advanced and gifted students.

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¹ Strategies for Modifying and Adapting Instruction for Gifted Students

² Gifted Education in Pennsylvania: Regulations, Protocols and Resources; Writing Effective GIEPs, Part I; Writing Effective GIEPs, Part II.

³ Gifted Education and the Law; Gifted Programs that Positively Impact Student Achievement.

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